

Mountain Home Aquifer Working Group
Report of July 16, 2004, for the
EXPANDED NATURAL RESOURCES INTERIM COMMITTEE
on August 5, 2004
Working Group Chairman Representative Bert Stevenson

The working group continues to look for projects and opportunities to restore or manage the Mountain Home aquifer. At the July meeting, three presentations offered three different options, each of which has potential for being part of the larger solution:

1. NRCS set-aside programs;
2. Low impact landscaping and xeriscaping for domestic and municipal water users; and
3. A local proposal to transfer water from Bennett Creek Reservoir to Mountain Home Reservoir.

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) are set-aside programs that can address water quantity and quality issues along with other environmental benefits. Utah has an EQIP program paying landowners to shut off wells for drought mitigation. This three-year program could serve as a model for a short-term measure while a 10-year CREP is implemented. CREP is a cooperative partnership between local, state and federal entities. It would probably take 18 months to two years to implement a CREP. Water rights to ground enrolled in these programs could be used for mitigation. The water could not be sold or used for other purposes. One of the most important factors in establishing a CREP in Idaho will be the state's contribution.

NRCS officials will tour the Magic Valley on August 17, 18 and 19th to explore developing an Idaho CREP. A public hearing will be held from 4:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. on August 18, 2004, at the 8th Street Center in Buhl. U.S. Senator Crapo and U.S. Representative Simpson are scheduled to attend.

The proposed Bennett Creek project lead to a discussion of other possible options along with the advantages and disadvantages of each. Before any project can be implemented, issues like economic feasibility, reliability of the water source, construction costs, and trade-offs between increased water supplies and recharge must be addressed. No one sector of the local economy can finance improvements alone, especially since the accrued benefits will be shared by the entire community. A broader-based approach is needed.

The need for funding mechanisms was discussed. Community members suggested that the legislature create some sort of funding mechanism to "equitably fund" measures that will benefit the entire community. Another funding option discussed was a revolving loan pool or something like it that could access state bonding authority and better interest rates. Gary Spackman, IDWR, will research Idaho statutes to identify organizations, structures and limitations related to the implementation of such a funding mechanism. He will also provide a general cost overview of the Bennett Creek proposal.

The Mountain Home Working Group will not meet in August. The next meeting is scheduled for 9:30 a.m. on September 14, 2004, in the Mountain Home City Hall Meeting Room.